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## NURSES OVERSEAS

BY JULIA C. STIMSON, R.N.

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The writer was the Director of the Nursing Service, A. E. F., from November 2, 1918, to June 17, 1919. During that time she visited over one hundred hospitals in all parts of France and in the area of occupation in Germany. Previous to this appointment, she was chief nurse of the American Red Cross for seven months and visited many hospitals (both Army and Red Cross), and before that period she was chief nurse of an Army hospital stationed at Rouen (Base Hospital No. 21). Because of these twenty-five months of experience, she had better opportunity to know of the nursing situation in France than has any other woman. During all of her inspection trips as Director of Nursing Service, A. E. F., she addressed wherever possible all the nurses stationed at any one place, and gave individuals opportunity after the meetings to speak to her separately. These interviews frequently extended well into the night, and at some places occupied a large part of the subsequent day. Upon every visit she talked at length with the chief nurses, endeavoring to find out what were the greatest difficulties they were encountering and how she could be of assistance in straightening them out. Copies of her reports of these visits are on file in the Chief Surgeon's Office, with copies of her recommendations and the action taken in regard to them. In addition to the opportunities given nurses to talk with her, the Director never failed in her effort to make it perfectly clear that she wished the nurses not to hesitate to write to her if there were any way in which she could be of service to them. She emphasized the fact that if what they desired required official action, their communications should go through official channels, and she brought to their attention that all such official communications must be forwarded by the Commanding Officer of the hospital, whether he approved or disapproved, and with his reasons for the approval or disapproval expressed. A circular letter from the Chief Surgeon's Office to all Commanding Officers of hospitals called attention to the Army regulation on the subject, but she made it perfectly clear that if there were matters which the nurses felt they did not wish to have go through official channels and about which they needed advice, they were never to hesitate to write directly to her. Hundreds of these letters were received, and many hundreds of replies sent. Because

of this universal dissemination of the desire on the part of the Headquarters Office of the Medical Department to know all difficulties and to straighten them out if possible, it is certain that the complaints that have since come to light about conditions in France were not brought to the attention of responsible officials at Headquarters, although every opportunity was given. The first unit was not returned to the United States until three months after the appointment of the writer.

It is perfectly true that during the first year of the war, or even afterward, the conditions for our nurses in France were not such as prevailed for the nurses of the British service. It must be remembered, however, that the first year that Americans were in the war was the fourth year the British were in service and, moreover, that in France the hospitals of the British were confined to a very small area which could be easily supervised by the Principal Matron of the Nursing Service. Moreover, in regard to travel accommodations for the British, it must be remembered that the British Sisters were not allowed to take leave wherever they chose, but were required to go to certain definitely stated places where there were hostels for Sisters. It naturally followed that it was a very simple matter to make arrangements for transportation at stated periods and reserve accommodations for the British Sisters to these prescribed places. On the other hand, American nurses were at liberty to take leave wherever they chose to go (with a few places excepted), and although the Red Cross (as soon as it could, with its multitudinous duties) arranged vacation places for our nurses and endeavored to secure accommodations and reservations, the system did not work out as satisfactorily as the British system did.

It is equally true that in many individual cases it was necessary for American nurses to carry their own baggage and to struggle with the other difficulties of travel. This was not due to the fact that they did not have rank, but to the lack of forethought on the part of some responsible officers. On the other hand, the number of instances when baggage details were arranged and soldiers assigned to them to attend to the luggage, and ambulances secured to convey nurses to and from trains, and when nurses were personally conducted to seats in trains and had meals arranged for them en route, and were taken to the best of hotels, and for whom everything was made easy, far outnumber the occasions when they had to struggle for themselves. Transportation in France under the most favorable circumstances was filled with difficulties, and officers can give accounts of worse difficulties in endeavoring to travel than nurses ever had. Trains were horribly overcrowded; there were no porters; cabs were

very scarce; frequently no hotel accommodations were available, and the necessity of sleeping in railway stations or in ambulances, or in other uncomfortable situations, and of getting food wherever it was possible to snatch it, was common to officers, nurses, welfare workers and soldiers; in fact, to anyone who endeavored or was required to travel. Just as soon as it was possible to do so, orders were issued from Headquarters that the Commanding Officer of a hospital which nurses were leaving should see that the Commanding Officer of a hospital at the next station at which they might be required to change cars or to leave the train, should be notified, in order that he might send a detail to look after their baggage and to make arrangements for them. Hundreds of nurses were benefited by this order and were met by ambulances to take them to hospitals overnight, and sent on their way the next day in comfort.

Another difficulty that was met with was the failure on the part of the French authorities to deliver the grade of transportation that was ordered, as it frequently occurred that when first class coaches were ordered from the French for the transportation of nurses, second or even third class coaches were delivered. The officer receiving this unsuitable grade of transportation for the nurses was often in a quandry as to whether to refuse to accept it, and perhaps by the delay jeopardize the sailing or other orders of the nurses, or to allow them to accept what had been sent. Such occasions did not occur many times, because as soon as the matter was brought to the attention of Headquarters, orders were issued that improper transportation facilities for nurses were never to be accepted, no matter what delays ensued. When it was possible to do so, hospital trains were put at the disposal of the nurses for their transportation, but it is naturally understood that for most of the time such trains were being used for far more important purposes than the transportation of nurses.

There has been considerable talk of the discomforts of the nurses returning to the United States, and statements that they were forced to travel second or third class—and even in the steerage—have been made. The matter was looked into with the greatest care not only in Brest, but in New York, and the following is a statement which explains the situation.

On an ordinary civilian boat, the distinctions between the second and first class are mainly those of food and the places on the boat to which passengers may have access. On transports where there had previously been parts of the boat reserved for other than first class passengers, these distinctions were entirely eliminated, and no nurse

at any time has been given any other food for messing accommodations than were supplied to the highest ranking officer, nor was she restricted in any way from any part of the ship to which first class passengers had access. When it is realized that there were thousands more first class passengers to be returned to the United States than there were first class accommodations on the boats available, it is to be seen that second—and in a few instances third—class berths had to be used for first class passengers. There have been boats on which certain junior officers have had better accommodations than some of the nurses, but on the other hand there have been hundreds of passages when there were many nurses who had far better accommodations than many officers.

With regard to the "extravagant use to which the graduate nurses of our Army have been put,"—there is no doubt that it is very hard for those who were not upon the spot to understand why the powers of our trained nurses should have been used for any other duties than the highly skilled work for which they were prepared. It has not yet been discovered how, in the first unorganized months of a war in a country which had been war-ridden for years, and where every available resource had been used and re-used, to best conserve the abilities of specialists, how not to waste energy or physical strength in labors or efforts other than those for which individuals are specially fitted. Buildings which had been used for other purposes, or which had been out of use for months, had to be prepared for the reception of wounded. If patients had not yet arrived; if cleaning men or scrub-women were unavailable, surely there was no nurse who helped in the preparation for the care of the wounded who begrudged her services for such a cause. Instances could be recounted of officers carrying beds and building partitions, and doing many other tasks which they had never dreamed of doing before; and it is equally true that thousands of stories could be told of nurses who showed their adaptability, their willingness to serve in any capacity whatever, wherever they could be useful, and who by their fine spirit and resourcefulness won the admiration and respect of all the people with whom they came in contact. Many lessons have been learned from this war, and one of the most important will have been the necessity for more specializing among the nursing forces as well as among the medical staff. When ten thousand ungraded nurses were thrown into a war in nineteen months, it was a rather superhuman task to grade them all and fit each to the duty for which she was especially adapted. There was no waste of spirit. The reports of the nurses themselves show that there is not a computable proportion of them which does not agree that the experience abroad,

in spite of its difficulties, was invaluable and one for which they can think of nothing precious enough they would take in exchange.

If three years ago anyone had said that within two years the United States Government would send ten thousand of its finest young women from homes of comfort, and often of luxury, across three thousand miles of perilous sea; into a country devastated and depleted by war, to struggle with a climate of the most depressing nature; to live under conditions of the crudest; to wear all the same sort of somber, unattractive clothing; to eat unappetizing (frequently) and unaccustomed food; to do work of the most heart-breaking and back-breaking sort under conditions that no imagination could have foreseen; to see sights that would make faint the stoutest heart; to endure privations—social, mental and physical,—but, after all, to accomplish what they went for and to return with ninety-nine per cent of their number intact and, on the whole, in better physical condition than they went over,—people would have said it could not be done. But it has been done!

Another of the largest lessons that has been learned from the war is the need of adaptability and the choice of adaptable personnel. With regard to the nurses, age was not so important, unless with advancement in age had come rigidity of mind and fixedness of habit. When nurses who for years had been going along in one channel of life, without deviation to the right or the left, (even though they *saw* beyond their own course and *looked* over into the ways of others), were suddenly uprooted and thrown into the maelstrom of a great war; into another sphere, with its new climate, its new customs, new language, new surroundings, and new kind of organization with its fixed routine and time-honored methods,—such nurses were not able to react with quietness of mind. And many there were who did not realize that their own irritation at the new methods, their annoyance at the changes, and their inability to adjust, were due to reactions from all the causes mentioned above, which were like so many hammers bruising their minds and their souls. Friction was inevitable under such conditions, and only the buoyancy of a youthful soul, the enthusiasm of fresh hope and courage, and the high-heartedness of those who were filled with energy and health could carry them over this trying period. In time all adjusted more or less, but the inflexible ones found it difficult to make the compromises necessary. They lost the tact and diplomacy which in the even tenor of their former ways had been among their greatest assets, and the spirit of fault-finding and querulousness crept in. The fact, however, that hundreds of nurses who requested continuation of service in the A. E. F. had to be returned to the United States contrary to their wishes, and

have also had to be allowed to leave the service after their return, is a curious commentary on the "lack of consideration" shown them while in the service.

The majority of nurses who went overseas have broadened their view by their service abroad. The give and take of Army life has shaken them out of their ruts; they are richer for their experiences, whether they were pleasant or disagreeable. They have had the inestimable advantage of having visited a wonderful country. Many of them came in personal contact with people of other nations, and have in consequence enlarged their horizon and expanded their views. There was not one nurse who went abroad who did not want to go with all her heart, no matter what the difficulties might be, and no matter what the dangers or hardships. They were filled with the spirit of patriotism and loyalty and with the overwhelming desire to be of service. They have had the desire of their hearts, for they have been of service. Many sacrificed posts of importance and gave up remuneration far in excess of what they received from the Army. The nurses have not been mercenary, and have given no thought to these sacrifices. They offered their services to their country, but they have had their reward,—the reward of work well done. The memory of the services they rendered and the satisfaction that they got in their work will be an undiminished joy for the remainder of their lives.

The clashing of personalities that occurred so often; the times when chief nurses failed to develop in Commanding Officers a confidence in their coöperativeness and common sense; when nurses on wards were unable to secure the cheerful assistance of corpsmen; when from the top down, a sense of harmony and esprit de corps was missing; when patience with those who were new to Army ways was worn threadbare; when irritation with those who found it difficult to adjust old methods to new emergencies became chronic; when, in short, the leaders forgot their opportunity to keep up the morale of the whole group—such times could not have been prevented by rank. They were due to human nature a bit out of control, away from the ordinary things that distract and refresh and keep sweet.

The writer is in favor of rank for nurses, because she feels that it will make the status of the Army Nurse Corps perfectly definite to every member of the Army. At the present time, while it is clear to some,—to those who have access to the Army Regulations and the Manual,—it is not obvious to the ordinary soldier or officer, and it should be. The Army finds it necessary to accomplish its purposes by giving rank to certain men in order that it may be clear to everyone that they have the authority to enforce the orders which it is

necessary for them to give to meet their responsibilities. Nurses have very definite responsibilities, but it is not obvious to everyone that they have the authority which will enable them to meet them. It is believed that rank for nurses would increase the efficiency and dignity of the Army Nurse Corps.

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SOME QUOTATIONS FROM THE HEARINGS BEFORE THE SUB-  
COMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON MILITARY  
AFFAIRS, UNITED STATES SENATE <sup>1</sup>

SENATOR CHAMBERLAIN. There has been a great deal of insistence upon members of the Committee that there should be some change in the Nurse Corps in the matter of giving them rank—

GEN. IRELAND (interrupting). Yes, sir.

SENATOR CHAMBERLAIN. I wish you would discuss that a little. I do not know what your views are, but I wish you would discuss it to some extent.

GEN. IRELAND. My sympathies are entirely with the members of the Nurse Corps. I might say that I am probably the original advocate of the Nurse Corps in the Army. I went down to the beach at Siboney, and I asked the nurses who were on the Red Cross ship *Texas* to come ashore and help us, which was a very radical departure—

SENATOR CHAMBERLAIN. Where was this you did that?

GEN. IRELAND. At Siboney, Cuba, and it was a very radical departure, and never happened in the Army before. I have been in sympathy with them during all these years of their formative period, and I think I have been instrumental in assisting them in many ways. I hate to be in opposition to or opposing anything these splendid women want, but I think their idea of securing rank to better their position would be altogether wrong—altogether wrong.

SENATOR CHAMBERLAIN. Insisting upon rank, do you mean?

GEN. IRELAND. Yes, sir.

SENATOR CHAMBERLAIN. I have had complaints from nurses with whom and with whose antecedents I was well acquainted, where there was a disposition on the part of the commissioned personnel of the Army to treat them as enlisted men rather than as nurses—

GEN. IRELAND. But I have never seen any disposition of that kind.

THE CHAIRMAN. The complaint has been that the enlisted men of the Medical Department declined to obey the nurses' orders—

GEN. IRELAND. I have heard a good deal of complaint of that kind, but that finally comes down to the question of adaptability. I think that one of the nurses in a ward with a certain amount of tact will get generally what she wants. I personally have never seen any trouble in the nurses getting along with the enlisted men.

SENATOR CHAMBERLAIN. In case a nurse, say, a head nurse, in one of these institutions asks an enlisted man to do a certain thing, she has no power to compel it to be done by him, has she?

GEN. IRELAND. There is a regulation issued by the War Department, which has just been placed in my hands. It is dated May 13, 1919, and it was issued

[<sup>1</sup> Taken directly from the official record. Italics are ours.—Ed.]